

Sorry, we're here only for a day trip

Bustle falls short as budget, festive holiday hold people back

By N. TRISHA
trishang@thestar.com.my

GEORGE TOWN: The visitors are coming and the roads are congested. Even a cruise ship has docked here for the first time for the festive break, but the hotels are nowhere near full.

Flamingo Hotel by the Beach general manager Ong Hai Leong said the festivities this year paled in comparison with the previous Hari Raya Aidilfitri break.

"The majority of visitors are still locals but it is not like last year when there was a crowd.

"Some of our friends say they will not be heading over here as they anticipate bad traffic during the holidays," he said.

Ong said the hotel recorded a 70% occupancy rate but it was much better during the same period last year.

Malaysian Association of Hotels Penang chapter chairman Datuk Tony Goh said they anticipated Penang to be bustling with tourists but it did not materialise.

"The week before Hari Raya, there was only an average of 50% in bookings, but we expected a late surge.

"However, the occupancy is going around 60% to 80%, depending on the location of the

hotel. Maybe people are budgeting this year, or it could be because during Hari Raya, most people are heading back to their hometowns to see their families," he said.

Cruise ship *Costa Deliziosa*, with a capacity of 2,828 passengers, made its maiden port call at Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal here yesterday but most of its passengers would only be in the city from 8am to 1pm.

State tourism and creative economy committee chairman Wong Hon Wai said the cruise ship would only be stopping by for a few hours, offering visitors a brief glimpse of what Penang has to offer.

"Besides *Costa Deliziosa*, the *Serenade of the Seas*, with a capacity of 2,500 passengers, will also dock here on April 26 from 9am to 6pm.

"The pier is positioned to our advantage because the terminal offers tourists immediate access to our Unesco World Heritage Site. Visitors are treated to a seven- to eight-hour excursion," he said.

Entopia by Penang Butterfly Farm chief executive officer Joseph Goh said the number of visitors was almost the same as the last Hari Raya period.

"It was expected, as we noticed



Creating memories: (Top) The 'Costa Deliziosa' docking at the Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal. — Photo courtesy of Wong Hon Wai; Mas Andriani Miftahulhuda (left) from Cameron Highlands and her family visiting several attractions near Armenian Street in George Town. — LIM BENG TATT/The Star

a drop in domestic tourism in the first quarter of this year.

"We are glad it is not worse.

This year's Hari Raya holiday is shorter for schools, so we expect the crowd to be consistent until

Sunday before it tapers off," he said.

Vince Ong, who runs a popular cafe in town, said business has dropped 20% to 30% during this holiday.

"During the Chinese New Year period, business was okay but still slower than previous years.

"The market is slower now and at night it is worse," he said.

M Summit Group corporate communications manager Ng Su-Ann said their hotel's good business may be due to its location, which is in the heart of George Town.

"The occupancy rate this weekend is nearly full and we expect more last-minute bookings.

"Compared with the number of bookings within the same period last year, there is an increase of over 10% this year.

"There is a mix of local and foreign guests right now but most of them are Malaysians," she said.